

Statement of Congressman Luis G. Fortuño
Joint Subcommittee Oversight Hearing
Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Insular Affairs
Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National
Archives
U.S. House of Representatives

Census Data: Special Issues Related to U.S. Territories
May 21, 2008

Let me begin by thanking Chairwoman Christensen and Chairman Clay for calling this oversight hearing. The issue to be examined at today's hearing may seem like a mere housekeeping problem. It is not. The disparate treatment afforded the U.S. territories in the collection and reporting of census data and the consequent unavailability of current and reliable information on the territories is not an abstract or technical issue. Rather, it is an issue with meaningful consequences for the residents of these areas. We need to determine whether our census practices have—as I and many others suspect—made it more difficult for Americans living in the territories to participate fully in the equal opportunity society our nation has always strived to achieve. The primary question that Congress needs to ask—and obtain a clear answer to—is whether social, political and economic growth in the territories is impeded because the territories are treated differently in the collection and reporting of census data and, as a result, are treated differently by the various government agencies that rely on this information to provide services intended to benefit all Americans.

I do not want to pre-judge the testimony of the experts on the panel. But I am confident that today's hearing will confirm that the disparate treatment of U.S. territories has an adverse impact on the ability of federal and

local government agencies to provide services in the territories, as well as on private sector-led development in the territories. Common sense and experience suggest that this information deficit has had—and will continue to have—a negative effect on the provision of education and health care, capital investment from the states and overseas, the vitality of the local economy, employment and income levels, and the overall standard of living and quality of life of territorial residents. If this is the case, Congress must be prepared to act in order to redress this disparity.

As Mr. Cimadevilla and the other panelists will explain, the situation facing Puerto Rico is not the same as the situation facing the other territories. For instance, Puerto Rico has been included in the American Community Survey since 2005—a clear, albeit belated, step in the right direction. Nonetheless, in various ways Puerto Rico remains at a distinct disadvantage compared with the states with respect to the collection and reporting of demographic, social and economic data.

I would be remiss if the record did not reflect my belief that, no matter what measures Congress adopts to address the particular problem discussed at this hearing, Puerto Rico will remain at a perpetual disadvantage unless and until it normalizes its political status. For the smaller territories, there may be narrowly-tailored solutions to the problem we examine today. Not so with Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's four million U.S. citizens live under the U.S. flag, under U.S. sovereignty, and under U.S. federal law. The disparate treatment by the Census Bureau—and therefore by those in the public and private sector that utilize its data—is an inevitable byproduct of a much larger problem: the longstanding denial of equal civil and political rights to the residents of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico's unresolved political status is primarily a result of Congress's failure to fulfill its responsibility to sponsor a fair and orderly self-determination process on the Island, one in which the people of Puerto Rico are able to express their preference between permanent, constitutionally-valid status options. The only genuine solution to both the discrete problem we examine today and to the broader problem of Puerto Rico's political

status is for the people of Puerto Rico to choose, in a Congressionally-approved process, statehood or independence—but in neither case to continue their condition as second-class citizens of the greatest democracy on earth.

It is my most fervent hope that the hard work of Chairwoman Christensen and her Subcommittee will come to fruition with the passage of H.R. 900, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2007, which has been reported to the House by the full Committee on Natural Resources.

I want to conclude my statement by noting that, earlier this morning, I sent a letter to Speaker Pelosi, asking that she use her leadership to bring H.R. 900 to a vote on the House floor. I would ask that this letter be made part of the record of today's proceedings. In the coming weeks I will deliver to Speaker Pelosi thousands of petitions from U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico seeking her help to ensure that Congress, after more than 100 years, finally afford the people of Puerto Rico the right to participate in a fully informed self-determination process. I will tell you what I told Speaker Pelosi: if we can summon the will and the courage to see it through, passage of H.R. 900 will be remembered as one of the great historical accomplishments of the 110th Congress. It will end decades of institutionalized disenfranchisement of four million Americans, so many of whom have fought and bled and died for this great country. We must not leave the hard work for another day or to another Congress. The time to act is now.

Thank you very much.